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The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

May 31st, 1944

DEAR MEMBER,

"What of Europe? Is she sinking under her self-inflicted wounds? That to me is the *crux* of the present world situation." The words are those of General Smuts when he was given the freedom of Birmingham a fortnight ago. He put the rehabilitation of Europe unequivocally first among the tasks to be taken in hand after the war.

THE PHYSICAL FATE OF EUROPE

The life-blood of Europe is being drained away. To the millions killed by military action must be added the multitude that succumb later as the result of wounds or of constitutions weakened by exposure or fatigue. It was estimated after the last war that the *indirect* loss of human life, including the missing generation of those who would normally have been born and were not, exceeded the military casualties.

A recent article in *The Times* on "Europe's Lost Generation" drew attention to what is happening. In France in the first two years of the present war the birth rate fell by 10 per cent, involving a loss of 120,000 unborn children. In Belgium the fall in the birth rate has been still greater. Statistics show a similar decrease in the Axis countries. In Europe as a whole the number of children who would normally have been born, and were not, must number several millions.

Of the children that are born more die in infancy than in peace time. Of those which survive a large proportion suffer permanent injury through underfeeding and lack of vitamins. The report of the International Labour Office estimates that of the child population up to the age of fifteen in the occupied countries in Europe, excluding the occupied parts of the U.S.S.R., the vitality of probably 40 millions is being sapped by under-nourishment, and that the physical damage is in some cases irreparable. The report adds that while the data in the report present an alarming picture, they "are already far outstripped by the facts, for information is hard to obtain and travels slowly." The health of whole peoples has been affected and is suffering a strain the results of which will be lasting. The human material in Europe is dwindling and deteriorating in an alarming degree.

It is impossible to contemplate facts like these without envisaging the possibility that the physical basis of European life may be impaired beyond recovery, so that its civilization may crack and the home of much that is most precious in our human heritage fall into irreparable decay.

SOCIAL AND MORAL DISINTEGRATION

Apart from the sapping of the physical vitality of a people, war disrupts the whole of its social life. Where fighting takes place towns

and villages are reduced to ruins ; Cassino has ceased to exist. The inhabitants have to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. Crops and live-stock perish ; farm steadings and farm implements are destroyed. Peasants are driven from their homes and members of families scattered without trace of one another. Correspondents in Italy describe how children could be seen half-naked in the rain and cold, and men and women in filthy lice-ridden rags. Refugees were sent to " King's Italy," though its Government could do nothing but herd them in camps where, if they were to be fed, they must remain in squalor and misery till the end of the war.

Similar conditions may be expected to prevail wherever in Europe war leaves its trail.

Already in Germany whole cities are being obliterated from the air. Neutrals report that the devastation in Berlin is unbelievable ; the German capital is near the point of being erased altogether. Gas, electric and water mains have largely ceased to function ; the destruction of shops has led to the breakdown of the system of distribution.

As the result of bombing, bombardment, migrations and deportations, tens of millions of people in Europe have been rendered homeless. We cannot picture what such complete uprooting means.

In ordinary times catastrophe may strike individuals, but there remains as a rule the possibility of recovery. Damaged property and goods may be repaired or replaced ; in the last resort there is recourse to various forms of public assistance. But for multitudes who have been rendered homeless, all means of repair have been likewise destroyed. Insurance may be irrecoverable, or, if recovered, may be worth next to nothing. Ration cards, food, supplies of all kinds, medical and dental aid are all unprocurable. All the customary supports of civilization have disappeared. For countless individuals life offers nothing but a stark hopelessness.

A large part of the coming generation in Europe will have passed through experiences such as these during the formative years of adolescence. Where armies contend, and for those who have been rendered homeless, schooling is at an end. Even where the schools have remained open, children are in many instances prevented from attending by lack of warm clothes or footwear ; in Norway the shortage of shoes has prevented school attendance in the bitter months of winter. Absence of heat in the classrooms, under-nourishment and hunger, severely limit the power of concentration. Lack of soap and hot water encourages the spread of disease and breaks down habits of personal hygiene. " Hunger, physical misery and poverty," to quote again the I.L.O. report, " become a kind of obsession which distorts children's moral values and makes all standards of behaviour meaningless to them."

Young people, like adults, are subject to police repression. The humiliation of their country and the impossibility of serving it in any constructive way breeds a sense of complete hopelessness. Those evacuated from areas of military importance or bombed districts have to adapt themselves to the unhealthy and miserable life of refugee camps or barracks, with the accompanying nervous strain. In the rebuilding of Europe we shall have to reckon with a generation which

includes many physical and nervous wrecks, who have been incapacitated for the responsibilities of social and public life.

Perhaps the most calamitous effect of Nazi rule is the systematic destruction of all centres of spontaneous life.[1] All independent groups have been deliberately suppressed. Social bonds have been further weakened in the occupied countries by the divisions within families and among neighbours, between those who by choice or for the sake of personal advantage side with the occupying power and those who engage in active resistance. Bitter antagonisms have been created which may flame into civil war. The whole social atmosphere has been poisoned by suspicion and mistrust, which it will be one of the most difficult tasks of the future to overcome.

When we think of the mass migrations and mass deportations of millions of people, and try to picture the devastation and breakdown of the conditions of social existence for millions more, we realize how near the fabric of society is to complete dissolution. The Europe we have hitherto known is in danger of disappearing altogether.

Whatever recovery may be possible there will be large shifts in the foundations of society. New classes are emerging to displace the old. There are wide areas where, as Major-General Fuller says in a recent issue of the *New English Weekly*, "the new and rising middle-class is composed of war profiteers and black marketeers. Extortion, bribery, cheating and thieving are the elements of the new morality, consequently the honest and law-abiding go to the wall. Nevertheless, these thieves and extortioners are not the most powerful element in the new social order; for they are outclassed by the partisans—the rising aristocracy. These are violent men, men of a new feudal order. To them might is unquestioned right. What they want they take." The governing factor in the social order, as they understand it, is the rifle.

THE ROAD OUT OF CHAOS

What are we to think or do in face of a situation such as has been portrayed? Can we escape being overwhelmed by it? The optimistic confidence that, as one reads in a current magazine, "power in the hands of the armies of liberation and of the rising peoples is bringing new life to humanity," seems to rest on an entire disregard of the facts. The belief, to which another writer says that his experience has led him, that "man's nature is fundamentally simple, rational and good" appears extraordinarily naive and childish in face of the insanity which is destroying the Christian and cultural heritage of Europe.

While these questions were pressing themselves on my mind there came into my hands a pamphlet by John Macmurray, entitled *Through Chaos to Community*.[2] It does not offer a solution of a problem of which there is no immediate solution. But by giving heed to what is said in this pamphlet we can find our bearings. The essential meaning of the situation is made sufficiently clear for us to know some of the precipices we must shun, and the general direction along which we must travel, if we and Europe and the world are to find salvation.

First, we must rid our minds completely of the false picture, which the metaphor of reconstruction too easily suggests, of ourselves as

[1] As was impressively pointed out in the letter published in C.N-L. No. 198.

[2] National Peace Council, 144 Southampton Row, London, W.C. 1. 6d.

architects planning to restore a demolished building. The fundamental truth is that we are ourselves part of the ruin. The world of human activities, into which the war has burst, is not a material habitation, but a nexus of human relationships. The war is not an accident, but an outgrowth of the state of our western society, the flowering, so to speak, of our way of life and our way of thought. "The desolation we see around us is the reflection of ourselves in the mirror of history; the reflection of our habits, our ignorance and our perversity." To understand this is fundamental to the making of a right peace. To put ourselves outside the problem and to imagine that our own standards of judgment are adequate to the task in hand is to fall into fatal error. We are inextricably involved in this disintegrating world.

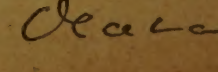
Secondly, John Macmurray warns us against the illusion that it is by our idealisms and conscious purposes that the course of history is mainly shaped. The determining force of history is the every-day behaviour of millions of ordinary people. This behaviour is determined in the main by social habit slowly shaped by the massive power of tradition. All conscious plans depend on habit for their execution. The best of plans, however sound in conception and backed by however much good-will, are bound to fail if they run counter to established habits. A revolution is a fundamental change in social habit, and we are living to-day in the midst of world revolution.

To judge by their actions and utterances, Christians are remarkably prone to the illusion which Macmurray is attacking, and much Christian effort is in consequence wasted through being directed to the wrong point. I can think of few things of which the effect would be more beneficial than that what Macmurray says on this subject should be widely read and laid to heart. It powerfully re-enforces the contention of the Archbishop of Canterbury in his Supplement (C.N-L. No. 198) that the real crisis to-day is not primarily a moral, but a cultural crisis; and that the cure is not to be sought in what the Church is at present principally doing, namely, in insisting on ideals and in efforts to intensify the will to pursue them, but in the quite different direction of seeking to re-establish a unity between men's ultimate beliefs and habits and their conscious aims.

Thirdly, it is clear to John Macmurray that it is religion that has created the traditions of the common life. Only religion has power to "produce and sustain in us that structure of emotional motive, and therefore that system of habitual action in the daily round of the common life, that alone can make social life possible and can keep it unified and harmonious . . . The common system of habit for a world community remains to be created, and religion is the instrument for its creation."

The only direction in which we may look with hope for an answer to this greatest issue of our time, Macmurray believes, is to Christianity —to a re-discovered and revivified Christianity, apprehended afresh in living relation to the conditions of our time.

Yours sincerely,



HOPE

My Dear Joe,

I am prompted to write to you by re-reading two of your previous News-Letter Supplements on prayer in war time. One is John Baillie's "Does God defend the Right?" (No. 53), and the other is Daniel Jenkins' "Concerning Prayer" (No. 166), which he has just expanded into a small and very helpful book.[1]

Each new phase of the war brings its own difficulties to those of us who try, in however feeble a way, to pray, and to make our prayer something more than merely an escape from the shadow of events which overhang us and our loved ones and threaten at all times to smash the pattern of our lives by maiming, pain, death and sorrow. Dunkirk and the summer that followed—will any of us ever become so numb that we cannot recapture in memory the feeling of utter impotence before tremendous events which possessed us then? But I suspect that many of us prayed more realistically than we had ever done in our lives. We wanted to feel that God had some control over events; it was very certain that *we* hadn't, and there was no temptation to tell God what to do, to bring Him in to bless our little schemes—we hadn't any. I suppose many of us uttered panic cries to a something we didn't normally believe in: but many more of us simply asked that whatever happened we might do our plain duty and not fail our children and our neighbours when the awful moment, whatever it might be, came, and in so doing we rediscovered the true simplicities of God and neighbour.

OUR INITIATIVE OR GOD'S?

It's more difficult now. We are on the threshold of events whose outcome is as unknown as that of the Battle of Britain while it was still being fought over our heads. Indeed, though there is less bewilderment and uncertainty about the final result on the big scale, there is more doubt about what it will mean for this, that and the other family, more certainty of death and sorrow for many people. What makes it so difficult to pray is that we have taken events by the forelock. We have taken the initiative into our own hands. Hour by hour through the night the tanks and the lorries go rumbling by: "58, 59, 60, 61 trucks on that goods train, Mummy, but I saw one wopper with 96," and in the little wood where we picked the primroses the earth is churned by wheels and under their netting camouflage I see—I must not say what. Everywhere this steady, relentless preparation: cataclysmic events, but of our own making this time. The young American schoolmaster prods his companions in the railway carriage, "Wake up, chaps—look at the Thames—maybe we won't come this way again." I start. Not this way! Not any way again for some of you. For England, for America almost a certainty of victory: but not for any one of these fellows, nor for millions of wives and sweethearts is there

[1] *Prayer and the Service of God*, Daniel Jenkins. Faber and Faber, 5s.

any certainty ; just a chance of being among the lucky ones. Can I pray just to be among the lucky ones ? Or can I compose myself to face the worst and then be agreeably surprised if it doesn't happen ?

It seemed difficult enough for me : then I struck up an odd sudden friendship with a Frenchwoman. She showed me in her hotel room the few odd books and photographs—all that she and her English husband had salvaged from a lovely home in Paris. " We long for the second front : it's our only chance to go back : the only release for our friends and countrymen. But we dread it too, for we shall destroy many of the things that we long to preserve." Whatever could she pray for ? I sometimes feel as though we had made a huge heap of all the most combustible materials we could lay hands on, soused it with petrol and were now advancing towards it with a lighted match in our hands and a prayer on our lips that not quite everything we cared for would be blown sky high.

THE WORD THAT SPEAKS

When prayer dries up and turns to the ashes of hypocrisy in our mouths, it is no use trying to force ourselves to pray in spite of ourselves. We mill around for something which does not offend our reason, and we end by being merely trivial. Some new light has to break in from outside ourselves and re-illumine the path. It comes in unexpected ways : it comes most often from the Bible.

I think I spent a good many years in the unenlightened darkness of believing that the Bible was only true in so far as it bore out my own experience. It's the curse of my generation that we subjectivize everything —things are " right for me," " wrong for me," " true for me," and the certainties and absolutes of so much of the language of the Bible jar on our ears. I was brought up in a home in which the Bible was God's Word ; that is to say it was regarded primarily as something which speaks. To that belief I have returned. I don't deny the truth of the attitude of historical perspective—the collection of books within the Bible with their varying emphases and startling differences of view—but it's all wrong if it hides the supreme truth that the Bible is A WORD, a self-consisting whole, speaking in spite of superficial variations, with one voice, the voice of God.

I am thankful that in childhood I got to know large chunks of the Bible by heart. Next to that I am most grateful for the wise old man who told me that the key to understanding the Bible was to wrestle with all one's might to understand the meaning of certain words—a job not for a few minutes with a Greek dictionary, but for a life time of wrestling with experience. The New Testament writers were struggling to describe events and experiences for which there simply weren't words. They burst the bounds of vocabulary. We are in exactly the reverse position : we have more Christian words than our experience can give content to, with the result that they are empty and meaningless to most of our generation. Whether we can ever fill those exact words with meaning again, or whether we shall find new ones for fundamentally Christian experiences and thence find our way back again to the Biblical words I don't know.

This word " Hope." What a miserable ghost of a word it has ecome in modern usage! " Saved by hope " is a phrase that has been n my head for weeks past, demanding to be explored and lived into. Saved by faith " we might accept more easily—but by hope! But think I begin to see its relevance to these days and to prayer in the ere and now.

Many of the things which the Bible says are, I believe, true on wo levels. They are true on the human level, true about men and he natural order of human life, and for Christians who accept Christ's edemption, they are true in an altogether new and different sense.

If we take this phrase " Saved by hope " first on the human level, sn't it just the plain truth that we are saved, we achieve wholeness nd happiness in the present largely by what we hope for in the future ? t is in living for the future that we achieve in the present. I believe hat thousands of marriages go awry because they are entered into n a basis of " present mirth hath present laughter "—enjoy it while t lasts, and they miss the lasting satisfactions which come out of lanning this, saving up for that, sacrificing present pleasure for future, lreaming and seeing visions and working for their fulfilment, enduring n order to obtain, dying that others may live. Lovers and mothers now what hope is ; those who never dare to hope for anything for ear of disappointment live the intimidated life of mice. Thousands f men and women are living on hope. They keep a home going at remendous sacrifice, are chaste in spite of great temptations, practice nnumerable self-denials for hope. Supposing that hope is dashed, leath snatches it away. Was it foolish to have hoped ? No : it made ife good.

Nevertheless, we know that hope can die : in many parts f Europe hope *has* died. Our individual optimism and own collec- ively dreamed Utopias can be cast alike into the dust. To hope that ve ourselves can build a new world out of the ruins we are making s the most ill-founded of all hopes and comes from thinking that Chris- ian hope is human hope realized by divine agency ; the same thing ut on the divine scale.

HRISTIAN HOPE

It is when we drag Christian hope in at the point where human ope is dealt a death blow that we go astray. Death frustrates the ealization of hope in the earthly future : God steps in with an exten- ion into eternity like a banker with an overdraft. Christian hope s either something which is there all the time or is not there at all ; t is not something which begins at the point where human hope ollapses.

The really shattering thing about the hope of the epistles is the olidity of it! We " hope for the best," vaguely, or we plan hopefully, orgetting human nature. They talk about " this hope," " a living ope," a solid reality already in existence. They speak of a life of od and those who are with Him, going on now with a vast range of xperiences and potentialities, a life moreover which is not dependent

on our believing in it. We can be outside it, but we cannot stop it from being. We hope for it: by faith we partially share it. The epistle to the Hebrews talks of faith as the inklings here below, the title deeds, of hope which is the real thing, and is in the eternities. What a reversal! But it's not the reversal of Hindu mysticism insisting that because spirit is real matter is unreal, making us scorn this world as an illusion. No, for this hope of glory, of a new order of existence with the Father operates in our earthly flesh, saves us here and now, changes us at this moment, affects what we do and say to-day, so that the eternal interpenetrates the present.

The Christian hope makes us live here as though we belong elsewhere. And the mystery is that only when we begin to see the smallness of our world of space and time and its relation to the great whole of eternity do we appreciate its richness and fullness.

How does this affect my praying? I begin dimly to understand (not as an intellectual conception, but at a deeper level of being) what it means to live one's life under the overpowering sense that one is moving in a world which belongs to Somebody else, and is part of a larger and different order of things. I hope on the human level with thousands of others for a family reunited and a home restored. The Bible calls me not only to look forward, but to look up, towards the life already in existence in the eternity which overarches the hopes and joys, miseries and sufferings of the passing time. It is agony to think that the earthly hopes of millions have been and are being shattered, that for all our striving—and strive we must or we sink back to the lassitude and death of the hopeless—God may not grant it to our generation to rebuild a ruined world. But when we look up the Hope is unassailable, indestructible, there for us all, bought for us, given to us. Dying we receive it. Living, we are saved by it.

Yours ever,

XE.

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